Whipping Up A Firestorm

STEVE BERGMAN'S THOUGHTS ON BUYING HONDA'S VTR1000

WHIPPING UP A FIRESTORM

ALTHOUGH THE JAPANESE bike industry has been making V-twin engines for their bikes for some time, until recently most of the finished product was aimed at the cruiser market, with the occasional exception, like Suzuki's VX800. While trying to look like the Bandit range the VX800 was, in the end, confused by having a steering geometry more like the aforementioned cruisers, with the result that its place in the market ended up being somewhat confused. This was reflected in poor sales which is a shame really as it had a great engine.

Suzuki soon changed to their act, climbing on board the bandwagon of success enjoyed by Ducati, when they introduced the TL1000S in 1997, dropping the VX800 and introducing more Vees in the cruiser range such as the VZ800 Marauder. Although they had scored a bullseye with the engine of the TL1000S, the handling was something else – the TL1000S being (allegedly) prone to wild tank slapping knife edge stuff. Suzuki tried to sort this out by recommending the fitting of a steering damper, but then in effect admitted they'd got it wrong by introducing the TL1000R to us the following year. But the Suzuki TL1000R was pipped to the post by Honda's own answer to Ducati, the VTR1000 Firestorm. I'm not sure why the Firestorm at Group 14 should be a significant number of insurance groups below similar Ducatis, with the Ducati Supersport 900 FE at Group 18 or the 916 at group 21 – although their attraction to the light-fingered may have something to do with it. It is down on power; 108bhp, as opposed to 125bhp for the 916, although in reality this sort of difference doesn't normally cause problems on the road. Unless, that is, you are trying to lose your license. There is a considerable difference in price though. Ducatis can cost as much as thrice the price of the Honda Firestorm. What this does mean is that even if you can't afford that long dreamed of Ducati you can experience at least some of the reason V-twins are so addictive.

Honda family nose leads the pack into the new millennium. Or something like that.

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The Honda Firestorm is light at 192kg, which is 12kg more than the FireBlade (that's about 25lbs to those of us who havn't been converted) but 5kg less than the Suzuki TL1000R. But the 70lbs of torque the Firestorm kicks out is more than the FireBlade delivers and 8lbs less than the TL1000R. And usable low down torque is what V-twins are all about. You know how you can fall in love with the howl of four cylinders on song? This is whale noise impersonation time! Well, a similar thing happens with V-twins... you fall in love with the low-down thrust coupled with the growl of the exhaust note. Especially if you have changed the standard silencer, enabling you to fully appreciate the V-twin beat!

But what's it like to run a Firestorm. Read on.

First the bad news. The fuel consumption sucks! The petrol tank holds 16 litres with 2.5 litres in reserve. That's 3.5 gallons and half a gallon – 4 gallons all told. That will take you 150 miles if you're careful and only 90 if you're not, working out at 32mpg being careful and only 24mpg doing what the bike was designed for – having fun. Terrible. It is awful. I havn't seen figures this bad for a big bike since the old Suzuki waterbottles!

As standard, the Firestorm is fitted with Dunlop 204 tyres which seem to work just fine without being exceptional or even exciting. You can expect them to last about 4500 miles with mixed riding. Tyre choice at replacement time will be dictated by your riding style and pocket. There are better tyres than the Dunlops for sure, and with the ever-changing bike tyre technology you should not go far wrong with any quality make.

The seating position and comfort levels are very good, with the various buttons and controls falling nicely to hand (or finger, or foot), and adjustable. Which is just as well really as most bike manufacturers seem to think we are all the same size! I don't know anybody who would buy a car without an adjustable seat. Way back... you used to be able to turn footrests around on their mounts to adjust them and adjust handlebars by revolving them in their clamps or changing them altogether. Funny thing, this advanced technology! The statement about comfort levels doesn't, of course, apply to anybody daft enough to think that the small padded bit at the back is really a pillion seat. Mind you, with the dodgy fuel consumption, this is hardly a touring bike, is it? Which is a shame really as the torque from the V-twin engine is brilliant and very addictive, allowing you to overtake in an easy lazy sort of way with gear changing being less important than with other bikes. You find yourself changing gear earlier and earlier. In theory you can also put the V-twin power down earlier in bends too. While we are on about it that torque is easily capable of making the front wheel go very light indeed – honestly, I couldn't help it officer; it does it on its own!

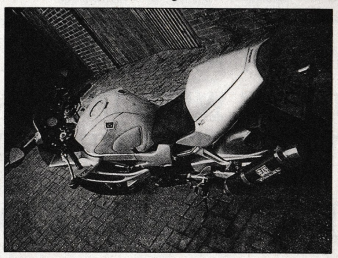
The handling overall is very good, scoring a massive big grin factor, but pushing the bike really hard will show up the soft front forks. Those of you who like to have a tinker around on rainy Sundays when you don't want to go blasting around the countryside (making mental notes of all the petrol station locations – just in case) will probably want to see if it's possible to fine tune the front forks. They can be sorted in the manner that many riders of the past have sorted out the traditional soft Japanese front ends – experiment with fork damping levels by changing the oil thickness and putting spacers in with the springs if you think they're too soft. Car inlet or exhaust valve springs come in many widths and lengths and are jolly good for use as bike fork spacers.

The ubiquitous Baglux tank cover and bag will aid bike usability no end, as does the space under the seat which is big enough to take a U-lock, thus keeping you pride and joy *your* pride and joy. Honda even supply a gizmo thingy to hold the seat in the open position, making it easy even for the laziest person to have no excuse for not locking their bike up. You could even get some throw-over panniers, allowing you to go touring from petrol station to petrol station.

Although Honda state a main service interval of 8000 miles, the average user is unlikely to do that in a year as even on a good summer we don't get that many sunny Sundays. Go for once a year or 4000 miles. That fits in [illegible] tyre wear very nicely, meaning you pull the bike out of its mothballs in May, service it and fit new tyres for the fun to come.

The bits that need accessing for services are indeed accessible – which makes a nice change, and given the simple engine layout you might even attempt it yourself. If you do, use a good brand of engine oil or you will find the engine getting noisy and rattly after only a few thousand miles as the cheap oil does its runny water impersonation. Good engine oil will also be more slippery, doing its bit towards fuel consumption... Am I going on a bit about fuel consumption?

Most people like to make their bike at least a little different from the crowd, even if all they do is colour-matching the handlebar grips, tax disc holder or fairing bolts. All that's very well, but other things to be considered should include a [illegible] engine and [illegible] so early interv[illegible] lubricant would [illegible] advisable than le[illegible] it until it seizes up. In addition, changing the silencer will at least make the bike sound better and at best may even improve performance. Remember to consider fuel jet or air cleaner changes if you fit a more 'open' silencer. Expect to pay anything up to £1000 for a replacement end can (yes, really). The Yoshimura carbonfibre end cans will rush you at least that.



To sum up, the Honda Firestorm really is a nice bike with a good finish, helping looks, and a great engine, helping smiles. Although the package is spoiled a bit by the fuel consumption, it shouldn't put you off trying one of these Hondas for size. Ducati wannabee owners will love it and those of you who are getting a bit jaded with your across-the-frame four, Universal Japanese Motorcycle will love the change.